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ABSTRACT

Because of the decline in academic skills in college freshmen, colleges and universities have enacted placement testing to identify those students with inadequate skills in reading, writing, and math for placement in remedial classes. This document discussed reasons for testing, concern about excessive testing, and results of three past surveys of opinions and attitudes toward standardized tests. It reports on earlier research in which teachers' and public school students' attitudes and opinions were positive to neutral, while college students' were neutral to negative. Results are then reported of the current survey of attitudes toward standardized college placement tests among students in a developmental English class (n=28) and a freshman English class (n=21) at a west Texas university. These findings support previous research findings that college students' attitudes toward standardized tests are neutral to negative, and tend toward apathy. Suggestions based on these findings are offered for the college admissions office, the freshman orientation program, and speakers at high schools. References are included. The abbreviated student survey is appended. (TE)

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Freshmen Attitudes and the College Placement Test

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Running Head: Freshmen Attitudes

Abstract

Because of the decline in academic skills in college freshmen, colleges and universities have enacted placement testing to identify those students with inadequate skills in reading, writing, and math for placement in remedial classes. Reasons for testing, concern about excessive testing, and results of three surveys of opinions and attitudes toward standardized tests are discussed. The teachers' and public school students' attitudes and opinions are positive to neutral, while college students' are neutral to negative. The student opinion survey conducted at a west Texas university indicated that student apathy toward standardized tests may have influenced their testing achievement.

Freshmen Attitudes and the College Placement Test

In answer to the state-wide push for excellence, a west Texas university has been administering a college placement test to in-coming freshmen to identify students with inadequate academic skills in the areas of reading, English, and math, and to place those students in remedial classes (J.D. Miles. Interview. February 16, 1990). While the Committee on Testing to the Coordination Board, Texas College and University System (1986) admitted that the placement test was, yet, another test, it would eliminate some local tests, plus benefit the student diagnostically and motivationally. Moreover, frequent testing has become accepted as an integral part of our educational system by the students and the public (The Committee on Testing, 1986).

Since academic skills of in-coming college freshmen have been declining for the last twenty years, enacting placement testing for freshmen has become a necessity for colleges and universities (Morante, 1987). Admission tests are designed to discern the brighter students. In contrast, a placement test detects the less skilled student, reflects the levels of mastery and the academic area in need of remediation (Morante, 1987).

Lytle (1988) confirmed the fact that schools are testing more and more because they are inexpensive, easy

to administer, dealing with the basics, objective, and reliable over a long period of time for a large group for instructional planning and evaluation (Lytle, 1988). However, one test score is not accurate enough to determine a child's educational fate or placement (Lytle, 1988).

With the increase in testing, Daley (1976) stated that that test-takers would need more comprehensible information about standardized tests. Along with test purpose, the test administrator, the testing environment, and the scoring will influences the students' outlook toward standardized tests (Daley, 1976) .

A survey was conducted on college student's attitudes; the results were basically negative (Aiken and Romen, 1984). The students felt that their ability was not reflected and the questions were misleading and caused impairing test anxiety (Aiken and Romen, 1984).

Beck (1980) explored teachers' and students' attitudes about testing and then compared those findings to expectations by members of the National Council on Measurement in Education (NCME). Both teachers' and students' opinions were neutral to positive (Beck, 1980). The NCME members predicted more negative responses for both groups than were actually given (Beck, 1980).

Addressing educators' concerns about the poor attitude of students toward testing and related performance, Karmos

and Karmos (1984) sampled students in grades 6 through 9. Students self-reported their attitudes to be moderate to positive (Karmos and Karmos, 1984).

While high test anxiety can cause underachievement on standardized tests, Wittmaier (1976) submitted that low test anxiety can produce the same effect in other students. Low test anxiety students seem to lack general motivation to perform. Early research seems to indicate that these students will achieve better if their anxiety can be raised; however, other motivational avenues should also be explored (Wittmaier, 1976).

Objective

This study examined the local/regional phenomena of the west Texas university. The freshmen's test-taking efforts on the college placement test were influenced by their attitudes toward standardized testing.

1. Did the students see standardized tests as having relevance in their lives and education?
2. Were the students adequately prepared or informed that poor test achievement would result in placement in developmental/remedial classes?

Method

A Developmental English class (Eng. 1300) of 28 students and a Freshmen English class (Eng. 1301) of 21 students were surveyed--49 total population, 31 males and 18

females. 80 percent of the total population was in, or had been in, a developmental class. The university has an enrollment of approximately 2000 students and serves a rural area of 150 to 250 miles radius. The student body is aproximately a 50/50 White and Hispanic mix and is 55 percent non-traditional students.

The Student Survey was specifically constructed to gather data on the freshmen's attitudes and opinions of the college placement test and other standardized tests. The self-report instrument contained 31 questions (see Appendix for an abbreviated survey).

The survey was given to the two groups separately and was explained as a student opinion survey on standardized tests. A definition and examples of standardized tests were given and explained. The students were encouraged to respond honestly, and were assured that no question would embarrass nor incriminate anyone. As each survey was identified with a number alone and no name was taken, confidentiality could be guaranteed.

Results

The findings of this study are presented in frequency form. The most relevant results were in the students' responses to test anxiety, test effort, testing strategies and preparedness.

Table 1 shows that test anxiety is in the mid-ranges

with a tendency toward the highest level. In describing

Insert Table 1 about here

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student reactions (see Item 4, Appendix) to standardized tests, the two adjectives "anxious" and "frustrated" were marked by 22 students (45 percent), and 15 chose "neutral". However, "bored" was marked by eight men. Only six students chose "challenged" or "pleased".

A weakness in testing strategies is indicated in Item 5 (see Appendix) which asked if they frequently run out of time during testing. The "yes" response was marked 49 percent of the time. With Item 6("Which is more important about standardized tests, academic knowledge and skills or test taking abilities?"), the students showed their confusion of the tests by splitting their reponses. 25 students answered "academic knowledge and skills" and 20 marked "test taking abilities". Four students marked both choices.

Even though the 30 students (61 percent) knew about the placement test and the consequence of poor performance before they arrived at college (see Items 7 and 8, Appendix), apathy is shown in Table 2. 28 of the 49 students reported that they did nothing to prepare.

Insert Table 2 about here

59 percent of the surveyed college freshmen felt that standardized tests had an impact on their lives and education (see Item 1, Appendix). However, Table 3 on Test Effort indicates some indifference to standardized tests. While most of the students showed their effort to be next to the highest rating "3", only 12 students self-reported the

Insert Table 3 about here

highest rating "4".

Conclusions

The findings of this paper support previous research that college students' attitudes toward standardized tests are neutral to negative. Apathy is indicated by the responses in test preparedness and test effort. Any one or combination of factors of student attitudes may cause underachievement on tests. More research is needed on student attitudes toward standardized tests. No matter how valid and reliable a test is, the test taker must be willing to convey, honestly and fully, his/her knowledge and skills on that instrument for the test scores to have any true meaning.

Suggestions

1. The college admission office underline, highlight, or bold print the information about the test and the placement policy in their letters to the students.

2. Freshmen Orientation include a "mini" orientation about the placement test and the placement policy. Along with the college officials and advisers, last years' freshmen present testing information and consequences.

3. Speakers, panels and students from the colleges go to the high schools to inform the high school juniors and seniors of the placement test while the students still have adequate time to prepare.

Meaningful and timely information about the college placement test and the placement policy is critical for the in-coming freshmen. Insightful presentation of that material could make a difference in the test takers' testing attitudes and motivation, which in turn can effect their testing achievement.

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Appendix--Abbreviated STUDENT SURVEY of standardized tests

1. Do you usually think these tests have any effect on your life or education.

   ___a. yes

   ___b. no

2. Rank your test anxiety for these types of tests from least (1) to most (4).

   ___a. 1

   ___b. 2

   ___c. 3

   ___d. 4

3. When taking these types of test, rank your effort level (how hard you try)?

   ___a. 1

   ___b. 2

   ___c. 3

   ___d. 4

4. Which of the following is most like your usual first reaction to hearing that you will be taking a standardized test.

   ___a. challenged

   ___b. pleased

   ___c. neutral

   ___d. anxious

   ___e. frustrated

   ___f. bored

5. Do you frequently run out of time?

___a. yes

___b. no

6. Which do you think is more important about standardized testing?

___a. academic knowledge and skills

___b. test taking abilities

7. Were you told that poor performance on the college placement test would result in placement in developmental classes?

___a. yes

___b. no

8. When did you learn that you would be taking a college placement test?

___a. in high school

___b. before you arrived at college

___c. after you arrived at college

___d. just before you took the test

9. How did you prepare for this test?

___a. Was rested and comfortable

___b. Got some coaching

___c. Did some general studying before the test

___d. Did nothing to prepare

Table 1

Ranking of Test Anxiety

(N=49)

Rank	Males	Females	Totals
1 (least)	5	0	5 (10%)
2	10	5	15 (31%)
3	12	9	21 (43%)
4 (most)	4	4	8 (16%)

Table 2

Preparation for Placement Test

(N=49)

Type	Males	Females	Totals
Was rested and comfortable.	5	2	7 (14%)
Got some coaching.	2	1	3 (6%)
Did some general studying.	6	5	11 (22%)
Did nothing to prepare.	18	10	28 (57%)

Table 3

Ranking of Test Effort

(N=49)

Rank	Males	Females	Totals
1 (least)	2	0	2 (4%)
2	2	1	3 (6%)
3	19	13	32 (65%)
4 (most)	8	4	12 (24%)